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ABSTRACT

The reading content offered in Hong Kong to advanced learners of English as a second language underestimates their intellectual capabilities. Material presented to second language learners is found to be linguistically correct but containing trivial, dull, and unchallenging cultural and intellectual content. This situation is closely related to the tendency of these students to read only for examinations. The cultivation of reading habits in second language learners depends on personal engagement with content and on the recognition of deepening needs for reading. The reading titles and passages of three similar textbooks, two from Hong Kong and one from China, are compared to demonstrate some different approaches to reading content. Suggestions for nurturing students' love of reading are made. (MSE)

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DEVELOPING A LIFELONG LOVE OF BOOKS: THE CASE FOR READING

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the problem that often the reading content offered to advanced second language learners underestimates their intellectual capability. In Hong Kong learners are presented with linguistically correct reading materials, but the cultural and intellectual content tends to be trivial, dull, and unchallenging. This might explain why they don't read except for examinations. Drawing on insights from Bettelheim's work on reading, the writer suggests that cultivating reading habits in second language learners might depend very much on personal engagement with content. The reading titles and passages in three similar textbooks, two from Hong Kong and one from China, are briefly compared to demonstrate some different approaches to reading content. The author makes a few suggestions on how students might start to nurture a love of reading.

RUNNING HEAD: ESL AND READING CONTENT Keywords: Reading, reading content, advanced ESL, Bettelheim, Hong Kong, Chinese learners, extensive reading, intensive reading, reading motivation, reading content criteria.

Introduction-The Problem. Schooling in Hong Kong has some puzzling aspects. Academically-talented students, fortified by a traditional upbringing in a Chinese family, study diligently to pass fiercely competitive examinations. When they embark on higher education, most of them have amassed nearly 15 years of classroom instruction in English as a Second Language (ESL). Yet if one questions these students about the last English book they've read for interest, enjoyment or personal enrichment, the majority would be unable to utter the name of a single title or author. After an intellectual investment of almost a decade and a half in formal language training, these bright, hardworking students have rarely acquired the habit of reading in English, let alone nurtured the love of reading. Furthermore, reading habits are probably not much better in their mother tongue, Modern Standard Chinese. The decline in reading is a worldwide educational phenomena, something which has been noted in *The*

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Closing of the American Mind, Allan Bloom's (1986) polemical account of the failure of American higher education.

The experts are aware of this decline, and often take it for granted that the culprit is contemporary pop culture--videos, rock music, TV--all of which, they maintain, draw students away from books. I am in no position to decry the lure of popular culture, for when I do look at it seriously through the eyes and ears of a teenage daughter, I do find surprising depth and attraction. This has made me more reluctant to mindlessly criticize pop culture. First of all pop culture won't go away. Secondly, I believe it can at times complement what we trying to do in education. In this paper, however, I will rather focus on some forces in education which need serious consideration if our students are going to be lifelong readers in their native and foreign languages.

Shallow Content and Bored Learners

After years of working with the academically well-disciplined students of Hong Kong, I am beginning to realize that one of the significant factors which prevents these students from becoming ardent readers in ESL could be the perceived cultural and intellectual shallowness of the reading material we offer to them in the formal English class. It might be that the yearly presentation of unchallenging and unimaginative reading content, both in intensive and extensive reading, often claiming to be culturally, cognitively and linguistically relevant, actually prevents students from grasping the personal value of reading. This can transform highly motivated students into bored, passive learners.

In analyzing this problem, I will proceed by briefly alluding to some insights about reading content coming from the work of the child psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim and his colleagues at the Orthogenic School in Chicago. They view the same problem of reading relevance from a deeper perspective. This will be followed by some comments on what the official syllabus body in Hong Kong advises students and teachers about reading. I will then present some titles and slice of reading content from three contemporary ESL textbooks for Chinese learners, two from Hong Kong and one from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to show that selection criteria, even if they have an ideological bias, are better than a bland neutrality in choosing reading content. I will conclude by mentioning what some of us are in my department, the ELT Unit, are trying to do in order to cultivate a permanent love of reading in our undergraduates.

Bettelheim's Insights on Reading

I begin by mentioning Bruno Bettelheim and his colleagues who have observed a similar lack of depth in the mother tongue literature written especially for young children in the USA. Bettelheim believes that reading primers are principally used to teach children necessary reading skills irrespective of meaning and content (Bettelheim and Zelan, 1982). Bettelheim considers this lack of meaning to be a critical defect precisely because young readers assess the value

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of reading activity based on what it means to him/her during the here and now (Bettelheim and Zelan, 1982). The promise that reading is one of life's great joys and experiences seems rather empty when all the the child experiences are a banal series of reading texts. Such shallow reading content in fact cheats young people of the gain which literature is, access to deeper meaning, and that which is meaningful at his/her stage of development. For reading to truly hold a learner's attention, it must of course entertain and arouse curiosity, i.e. it must possess a practical relevance.

In his well-known book on fairy tales, *The Uses of Enchantment* (Bettelheim, 1985), Bettelheim has forcefully pointed out that reading must enrich the child:

(Reading) must stimulate his imagination, help him to develop his emotions; be attuned to anxieties and aspirations, give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to problems that perturb him...it must at one and the same time relate to all aspects of his personality--and this without ever belittling but, on the contrary giving full credence to the seriousness of the child's predicaments, while simultaneously promoting confidence in himself and in his future. (p. 5)

With these principles obtained from working with disturbed children Bettelheim and his colleagues believe this does not diminish their basic insight that much of the reading material in many schools consists of "empty texts" which in turn produce "bored children". Educationists and teachers must attempt to break this wasteful cycle. To nurture a love of reading we must very early in school select and provide what Bettelheim calls "a rich literature of fables and myths and tales of the human predicament" (Bettelheim, 1985, p. 5).

The Absence of Non-Linguistic Criteria

In the past decade applied linguistics and TESL have made great progress in helping practitioners understand more about the nature of language learning and language instruction. There have been advances in the study of discourse processes and writing as a process, the functions of language, communication theory and moves to integrate modern technology such as video and the computer into language teaching programs to mention a few. However, studies on the principles for the selection of the actual reading content have not always kept up with these advances. We are not always selecting the "rich literature" that Bettelheim considers essential for promoting reading. It is my hunch that the drop in reading behaviour might be the result of the commendable emphasis on purely linguistic models of human communication and discourse in selecting texts without regard to other equally important non-linguistic models of language learning. This has meant the worthwhile concentration on the abstract syntactic/communicative functions of language learning, but without the concomitant concentration on criteria for choosing intellectually and culturally rich content.

The better textbooks produced in Hong Kong strive for

cultural relevance, but quite often this is achieved by "localizing" the names of people and places without really altering the substance of the material. We have found that Hong Kong students are not easily fooled. They are perceptive and see through the superficiality of the content, but the motivating force of examination pressures pushes them on. Sham relevance might get students through examinations, but ultimately it diminishes student motivation to develop mature reading habits. They are simply not engaged in challenging subject matter. Superficial subject matter rarely brings students to the understanding that reading has been traditionally the main channel of cultural, intellectual and personal enrichment in both China and the West.

Syllabus Guidelines for Reading

Emphasis is on Instrumentality

To
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In Hong Kong a possible cause for the lack of appropriate reading content can be linked to the set of syllabus guidelines prescribed for teaching secondary school English in Hong Kong. These guidelines are contained in a document published by the Curriculum Development Committee (1983), an official body of the policy-making Hong Kong Education Department. The current guidelines advise educationists, teachers, textbook writers, and official examinations bodies on the teaching of English. In the centralised political structure of Hong Kong, such advice cannot be easily ignored. Its authority is powerful. This particular document sets out a series of prescriptions about student needs which appear unimaginative, narrow and restrictive. The document cites seven reasons for reading. They are:

seek them

1. Locate information for a specific purpose e.g. study or reference purposes in the library; ?
2. Know what is happening or has happened in Hong Kong and outside (by reading newspapers, magazines, and other sources of reports); No
3. Understand instructions in order to perform certain tasks in his daily life (e.g. he might want to know how an electric appliance works, how to cook, how to fill in forms, and so on); No
4. Know when or where something will take place or what is available (by consulting timetables, programmes, announcements, menus, advertisements. No etc.);
5. Keep in touch with friends by correspondence; ?
6. Play a new game, do a puzzle, or carry out some other activity which is pleasant and entertaining; No
7. Seek enjoyment or excitement by reading novels, short stories, poems, and other types of writing. ?

(Curriculum Development Committee, 1983, p. 22)

Although these guidelines are by no means unreasonable, most of the tasks underlying the guidelines would be done more efficiently and naturally in the mother tongue. However, in secondary school where learners should be at the intermediate/advanced level, the list is ordinally weak. It is probably more suited to primary school learners or beginners. One can assume that secondary school students in Hong Kong have had formal English instruction for at least six or seven years before entering Form I. Although the quality of instruction varies from school to school, students do in fact come into contact with English either in kindergarten or primary school. (Contrary to popular mythology, students in Hong Kong do in fact know their ABC's before they reach secondary school.)

Moreover, these guidelines are lacking the dynamism that would suggest that reading is still at the heart of learning. Reading is much too crucial for human development to be reduced to half a page in a syllabus document. What has happened to the sentiments expressed in Francis Bacon's maxim that "Reading maketh a full man" or Montesquieu's lines, "There is hardly any grief that an hour's reading will not dissipate". A careful reading of Halliday's (1973) *Explorations in the Functions of Language* or Trilling's (1965) *Beyond Culture* would produce immensely different reading guidelines.

Deepening Reading Needs

The need for reading at any educational level goes beyond simple information exchange or practical communications. Reading, even in this age of technology, is still at the core of intellectual discourse. Reading can put one in contact with science, philosophy, history, art, those intellectual constituents so necessary to make us more human (Adler and Van Doren, 1972). This humanization is a value in itself. Syllabus guidelines which provide little advice of consequence about this aspect of reading are bound to result in an indifferent selection of reading content, and subsequently indifferent students.

As a result of the syllabus just cited, in Hong Kong there are no clearly delineated criteria for choosing content which communicate to both student and teacher alike that reading enables an individual to reach the depths of human wisdom and understanding, as is found in reading poetry, literature, and philosophy and the other disciplines of knowledge. For a reading syllabus to be complete it must somehow indicate to the experts--textbook writers and teachers--that students need to read in order to improve their minds, to be culturally enriched, to acquire wisdom and understanding, to overcome grief, to be edified, to gain experience, to receive advice, to wonder, to marvel, to imagine, to recognize love, or as so many of my students tell me "to broaden their horizons".

Reading Content in Hong Kong Textbooks

At present the most competent secondary English textbooks in Hong Kong are "successful" to the extent that they enable teachers to easily take students through the complexities of

English grammar and diverse lists of communicative language functions, all of which are examinable. Grammatical structures and communicative functions are the raw material for the crucial public examinations. However, if one peruses the reading content in the best textbooks on the market in Hong Kong, one will observe that they address subject matter of thin intellectual/cultural relevance for the sophisticated youth of Hong Kong. For example, one popular Form II textbook in Hong Kong presents a series of intensive reading passages with the following titles:

Monkey and Pelican Hurt in Zoo
 Learn to Swim
 Bargaining
 \$50 for the Best Road Safety Slogan
 The Stars and Planets
 Walk for a Million
 Computers in Everyday Life
 The Key
 For those Who Trust the Stars
 Giving Eye Drops
 The Principal Speaks to the School
 Robin Rescues a Poisoned Dog
 Mary's Diary
 A Cheap Meal
 Where Did You Come from?

A similar textbook, also at the Form II level, presents the content of its intensive reading passages with the following sequence of titles:

Junior Police Call
 Hong Kong's Growing Thirst
 A Fabulous New Colour
 The World's Greatest Inventor
 Hong Kong's Spidersmen
 A Picnic Warden
 The Barking Deer of Hong Kong
 The Lady with the Lamp
 The Road Crossing Code
 The Fastest Boy in the World
 Stamp-collecting
 Stop Those Hiccups
 Scouting
 The Thunder-cart
 The Strange History of Ping Pong
 The Walk to Freedom
 Making Rain

These texts have been carefully written with careful linguistic principles by professional textbook writers. If they seem plausible for Form II students, a closer inspection in a moment will demonstrate that the content underestimates the intellectual ability of 14 year olds who have on average studied English for at least 7 years, six years in Primary School, and one year in Secondary School.

Comparison of Hong Kong and PRC Reading Content

One should compare the contemporary Hong Kong reading titles and passages with those found in Marxist-oriented textbook written for a corresponding cohort of students in Mainland China. One textbook I have in my possession was published in Beijing in 1978. Conceivably this text is now discredited as being excessively political by the more open-minded leadership of China. In spite of this failing, the text possesses a maturity of thought and situation superior to what is presented in comparable Hong Kong textbooks. There is an engagement with the human predicament as it exists in the PRC, even though it might speak of foreign places and cultures. Besides teaching English, these readings have the definite purpose to teach the language learner about the correctness of the socialist cause. This was most assuredly an important criteria for content selection. In the PRC content selection was not left to chance.

Although one might disagree with this political orientation, it does at least lead students to a semblance of intellectual engagement and challenge, an element often lacking in the politically neutral Hong Kong reading texts. There is nothing superficial about the reading content in this book; the political atmosphere in the China of 1978 would not have allowed it. In this book we find intensive reading titles such as:

Liberation Brought My Sister Back
My High School Days
Kino and His Pearl
The Lost Watch
A Letter
Nathan Hale
Asia
William Tell
The New Party Secretary
Ministers with Pick and Shovel
Migrant Workers in the United States
A Comrade Has Hurt His Ankle
Old Man Wang.

Comparison of Texts

I would like to substantiate this claim by briefly looking at three reading passages selected from these three different textbooks. They are pitched to approximately the same level, Form II. The first one (Appendix-A) is taken from *New Integrated English 2* (Methold and Tadman, 1986); the second one (Appendix-B) is from taken from *Access Today* (Howe, Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, 1986), and the third one (Appendix-C) is taken from the PRC textbook mentioned above, which is simply titled *English Book 2* (1978).

In Appendix-A, entitled "Monkey and Pelican Hurt in Zoo", the student reader is introduced to the evils of society in terms of how people harm animals in the zoo. However, when one thinks about the evils that exist in any urban environment such as Hong Kong, animal molestation is not the most significant social problem. Similarly, the short essay in Appendix-B,

entitled "Junior Police Call", is a weak rejoinder to the attraction of joining a neighbourhood triad society, which lately both the Hong Kong Government and the PRC authorities fear.

Appendix-C, on the other hand, presents the student reader with a personal account of the experience of racial prejudice. In the plain words of Malcolm X the student reader is made aware of the effects of racism. There is more depth in this book because the compilers of this volume were not only considering the appropriate linguistic level, but also the appropriate ideological level. In this text the cause of socialism is being taught as well as English language. It is part of the hidden curriculum of learning English in the PRC. This has made me conclude that we can't seriously engage the minds of our students in continuing foreign language study until we find a suitable level of intellectual content to challenge and interest them.

Comparison with Foreign Language Learning in the 50's

If one argues that more sophisticated reading content is beyond the capacity of our students, I can only recall and reflect on my generation's first experience studying a foreign language. This began in High School with First Year Latin. It is interesting to note that foreign language study for my generation started after Primary School, usually in the first year of High School. In that first year we were drilled 5 days a week in the basic grammar and vocabulary of Latin. By the second year we were tackling authentic Latin prose, Caesar's *Gallie Wars*. In third year Cicero's orations and Vergil's poetry. We were not a class of over-achievers. These demanding tasks were part of an ordinary required foreign language curriculum. Even at the end of two years of our second foreign language, German, we started reading the poems of Goethe and Heine.

One might argue that both Latin and German are linguistically and culturally close to English, whereas English is alien to Chinese language and culture. This is a fair comment if students in Hong Kong were not starting their formal English study in kindergarten and were living in an utterly foreign environment where there was not the slightest awareness of at least the superficial aspects of the target culture. The Hong Kong of the 80's surely has enough of a Western facade to make even the most alienated language learner feel somewhat at home. Besides, we should not forget that any linguistic/cultural deprivation present in the society is more than adequately compensated for by the fact that students in Hong Kong by the time they have reached Form VI have had as much as 14 years of English study programmed into their schooling, and they begin their contact with English language in Primary School. Moreover, English is a living language by contrast with Latin, more than adequately represented in the mass media of Hong Kong.

Even today this kind of demanding modern language study my generation ordinarily experienced is not uncommon. Cormon (1986) reports that adolescents in French-speaking areas of

Switzerland study English as a third language in secondary school at the age of 15. At the end of three years these students are expected to read English classics such as *The Great Gatsby* and *Wuthering Heights*, and Cormon remarks that they are able to do this.

One might further argue that the subject matter in Hong Kong textbooks has a relevance to everyday life, and that authentic non-Chinese context would be difficult to understand or inexplicable to Hong Kong Chinese students. The hidden assumption here seems to be that the cultural differences between the Chinese and the non-Chinese *Weltanschauung* make the average Hong Kong student incapable of coping with cultural material any deeper than the familiar content presented in locally produced texts. This smacks of an extreme Whorfian viewpoint and the movement toward localization pushed to its most parochial extremes. We must ask ourselves if this is not the same student group that *Time Magazine* (1987) and *Fareastern Economic Review* Viviano, 1988) have applauded as possessing superior academic ability in science and mathematics? Is it possible that a whole generation of students is capable of overachievement in scientific/technological disciplines, but not equally able in the humanities and foreign languages? An intriguing research question indeed.

The ELT Unit's Lending Library

As my own teaching department, the ELT Unit, receives students toward the end of their academic careers; I would like to mention one way that we, even at this late stage, attempt to nurture an enthusiasm for serious reading. Many of our undergraduates do not come to university with a love of reading. However, rather than nag them about reading and in response hear all their worn out excuses about examinations and the heavy workloads in their major subjects, we have set up a modest lending library consisting of over one thousand books donated by faculty members, students and friends of the university. Some of the books are the "great books", some of them modern works of fiction, including science fiction and detective stories, and non-fiction. For the most part they are serious books, and not "escape literature". With the help of a student we have classified the books in the following manner:

- Books for Beginners
- Modern Writers
- Classics
- Entertainments
- Special Series
- Non-Fiction
- Memoirs, Biography & Autobiography
- Anthologies
- Criticism
- Plays
- Poetry.

The special feature of this library is that we allow students to borrow a book for three months, with the option of renewal for an additional three months. If a student borrows a book from the university library, the most he can keep the book is one

month. We operate on a non-bureaucratic honour system, which means no one administers the coming and going of the books.

Rationale for the Library

Some colleagues and myself are insisting that all first year students read one book a semester and give a written/oral report on it. We allow our students to freely choose a "serious" book from the library or any other source, and encourage them to purchase books from the campus bookstore. I insist that the book chosen be written in good English prose, not to be a snob, but realizing what they read will in fact help their thinking and writing. We remind our students that as university undergraduates they have had a foundation of 14 years of English instruction and now they must capitalize on that foundation by reading non-textbooks which are enjoyable and intellectually and culturally stimulating.

We have compiled a booklist to distribute to our students. Right now the list consists mostly of fiction, books which over the years undergraduates have found enjoyable and culturally enriching. We emphasize that these books and the books in the library are not "escape literature", passive reading which helps them fill up the boring periods of the day, but rather English prose challenging our students with ideas, attitudes, and beliefs. Our long rang goal is that this reading will enable them to become more cultured and decent human beings, and perhaps change/deepen some fixed cultural beliefs.

To disabuse our students of the idea that we are being chauvinistic in our choice of books, we explain to them why most of the books in the library and on the reading list deal with non-Chinese themes. We do this in part because we believe they as Chinese raised within a traditional family in the cosmopolitan milieu of Hong Kong are already equipped with a profound understanding of their own and other cultures. We believe that these students are mature enough to know that an understanding of their own culture and other cultures will help them find those universal elements of humanity which transcend ethnicity and culture.

With the establishment of this library, we expect all first year students to have an extensive reading book in their possession. Even if they read ten minutes a day, if it is something they have themselves chosen and enjoy, we believe it is an accomplishment which we hope will lead to a love of reading. The pessimist would say it's too late in their academic careers to change them and nurture the reading habit. However, I disagree from what I have observed of our students. Ideally, this practice of carefully selected extensive reading should have started in primary or at least secondary school. There are indications that pilot extensive reading schemes in Hong Kong are being successfully implemented (Kwan, 1988). A love of reading is a precious feature of schooling which students can take away with them for a lifetime.

Conclusion

By way of closing, I would like to relate the reaction of two university students which convinced me of the efficacy of our library scheme. Both students graduated from Chinese-medium secondary schools. To one I introduced the book "Night" by Elie Wiesel, The Hungarian-born American Jew and recipient of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize. The book describes his experiences as a teenager in Auschwitz. After reading this book, the student told me it was the first time she ever read an English book that so absorbed her that she couldn't put it down.

The second student was introduced to Alan Paton's "Cry, the Beloved Country", the story of a black Anglican priest in the South Africa of 1948. On returning the book, the student told me she frequently wept while reading the book and she would like me to find her other books by the same author. If we as teachers can get our students to react in this manner, the chances of us nurturing a lifelong love of reading are high.

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Appendix-A

Monkey and Pelican Hurt at Zoo

A monkey nearly died at the Zoological and Botanical Gardens today. Someone threw an empty bottle into the animals's cage. The bottle broke and the monkey picked up one of the pieces. The sharp glass cut the monkey's hand badly.

The keeper who looks after the animals told our reporter the story.

'I saw it happen,' he said, 'but I couldn't do anything because I was too far away. The boy who threw the bottle was about fourteen years old. He didn't want to hit the monkey. He just wanted to make it move. Well, the bottle broke and there were pieces of glass on the floor of the cage. The monkey picked one up, and seconds later, blood was pouring from the animal's hand.

'Visitors often hurt the animals,' the keeper continued. He pointed to a large pelican. 'The bird standing on that rock, the one with the large beak, will eat anything you throw at it,' he said. 'A few days ago someone threw a tin can at the bird. The bird thought it was a fish and opened its beak. The can cut the bird's pouch.'

Our reporter asked why people threw things at the animals.

'People like to see the animals move,' the keeper explained. 'An animal that's standing still isn't interesting, you see. people don't think about the pain they cause the animals.'

The animals which are on show in the zoo are living creatures. They can feel pain and fear, just like human beings. This newspaper asks all its readers to remember this: Don't feed them or throw things at them. (Methold and Tadman, 1986, p. 9)

Appendix-B

Junior Police Call

Junior Police Call is a youth organization that was set up by the Royal Hong Kong Police Force in July 1974. Its aim is to encourage young people to help the police fight crime, and to become good citizens. All young people between the ages of nine and seventeen can become members.

Members are asked to use their eyes and their ears. Whenever they see or hear anything that may help the police, they are asked to inform the police. They can do this by phoning a special number, the JPC hotline, or

they can report to a policeman. They should identify themselves as JPC members. The club rules are that members must never put themselves in any danger by taking action alone, the membership card says:

The JPC has television and radio programmes and a JPC monthly newspaper. By 1985 it also had 397,500 members! That was twice as many as all other Hong Kong youth organizations put together! Why is it so successful?

The main reason is that young people like to help the police. They have seen films and read stories about cops and robbers, the good guys against the bad guys. The JPC gives them a chance to take part, in a small way, on the side of the good guys. JPC members have had a great deal of success and have done much good work. They have supplied information which has led to the arrest of robbers and the recovery of stolen cars, valuables and other stolen goods. Many of them have been awarded certificates for their services to the police.

But there are other reasons. The JPC organizes a large number of interesting and healthy activities for its members. These include visiting police stations, hiking, weekend camps, concerts and shows, competitions, etc. The prizes for some of the competitions are very attractive. In the past, winners have gone on trips to England, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, as well as winning such valuable prizes as wrist-watches, cassette-recorders and cameras.

JPC members also take part in community service. They build footpaths for villagers, sell flags to raise money for charitable organizations, take part in Walk for a Million, visit homes for old people, and help the Keep Hong Kong Clean campaign.

Membership of the JPC does not cost anything, and there are no uniforms to wear. If you would like to become a member, you can obtain an application form from any police station. (Howe, Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, 1986, pp. 2-3.)

Appendix-C

My High School Days

Malcolm X (1925-65) was an outstanding leader of the black people in the United States. He was assassinated in 1965 at the age of 39. The following is taken from the book "The Autobiography of Malcolm X".

The day I started at Mason High School, the only high school in town, I was very happy.

Some of the boys and girls at school, I found, were very

friendly. They also called me "nigger", but I could see they didn't mean it in a bad way.

I worked hard at school. I liked English. The English teacher, Mr. Ostrowski, was an interesting man. He was a born "adviser". He was always telling us how to become "somebody" in future. I liked history, too. But I didn't like the teacher because he liked to joke about "niggers". I remember, one day we came to the part in the textbook about Negro history - it was only one paragraph long. He laughed. the Negroes, he said, were usually lazy and stupid. And their feet were so big that when they walked they left a hole in the ground.

I never liked mathematics. I don't know why. But basketball was a big thing in my life then. I was on the team, and we often went to nearby towns to play other school teams.

I was doing fine at the school. I soon became the top of the class. And then I, the only black boy, was made class president. But just then, something happened that changed my whole life.

One day, I happened to be alone in the classroom with Mr. Ostrowski. "Malcolm," he said to me, "I think it's time you started thinking about your future. What do you want to do when you finish school?"

"Well, sir, I want to be a lawyer." I don't know why I said that. In these days, there were no Negro lawyers or doctors in Mason.

Mr. Ostrowski looked surprised. It was some time before he spoken again. "Malcolm, one of life's first needs is for us to be realistic. We all like you. You know that. But you are a nigger, and a lawyer is not a realistic job for a nigger. Why not think of something you can be? A carpenter, for example. You're quite good with your hands."

It was then that I began to change - inside.

I drew away from white people. I came to class, and I answered questions but I talked little and showed no interest in my studies.

Not long after that, I left the school. (English Book 2, 1978, pp. 25-27)